

Bullying And Self-Efficacy In Higher Education: A Systematic Review Of Psychological Impacts On University Students

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Abstract

Bullying within higher education environments poses a significant threat to students' psychological well-being and academic development. Despite extensive attention to its prevalence, the specific impact of bullying on students' self-efficacy remains insufficiently addressed in current literature. This study conducts a qualitative systematic literature review to examine how various forms of bullying—verbal, social, psychological, physical, and cyber—affect key components of self-efficacy, including self-confidence, motivation, perceived control, and coping ability. A total of 42 peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2025 were systematically selected and analyzed using thematic synthesis. The findings reveal that bullying consistently undermines students' belief in their academic and personal capabilities, erodes intrinsic motivation, disrupts perceived autonomy, and weakens emotional resilience. These results underscore that bullying in university settings is not only a behavioral issue but also a profound psychological barrier to student empowerment. The study emphasizes the need for evidence-based institutional interventions, including proactive prevention strategies and psychological support systems, to safeguard student self-efficacy and promote resilience in higher education.

Key words: *bullying, self-efficacy, university students, psychological resilience, higher education.*

INTRODUCTION

Bullying has emerged as a persistent and escalating concern within educational settings worldwide, including in higher education institutions (Ratnasari et al., 2020). Although traditionally associated with primary and secondary school environments, recent evidence suggests that bullying remains prevalent even among university students who are presumed to have developed emotional maturity and autonomy. In Indonesia, data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), and various educational watchdogs indicate a significant year-on-year increase in bullying incidents. For example, in 2023 alone, 87 out of 2,355 reported cases of school-related violence were classified as bullying. However, these figures likely underrepresent the problem, as only a fraction of students feel empowered to report such incidents.

More concerning is the normalization of bullying in academic cultures, where aggression is often cloaked in the guise of seniority, competition, or tradition (Zulkarnain et al., 2023). The psychological toll of this behavior is substantial. Victims frequently report symptoms of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and in severe cases, suicidal ideation. One notable example occurred in Central Java, where a medical student's suicide was traced to prolonged bullying within their academic environment. This case not only triggered public scrutiny but also led to the closure of the related academic sub-program.

While previous studies have documented the physical and psychological consequences of bullying, limited research has been conducted on how bullying specifically undermines self-efficacy—an individual's belief in their capability to succeed in specific situations. Self-efficacy, as theorized by Suharti et al. (2023), plays a critical role in motivation, emotional regulation, and behavioral outcomes. It influences how individuals interpret challenges, develop coping mechanisms, and maintain resilience under pressure.

Emerging research, including the work of Ruhimat et al. (2025) and Pujiyati et al. (2020), highlights a bidirectional relationship between bullying and self-efficacy. High self-efficacy may buffer the psychological impact of bullying, while repeated exposure to bullying may gradually erode one's confidence and sense of agency. Despite this, existing literature often treats self-efficacy as a singular construct without dissecting the specific subcomponents affected by bullying, such as confidence, motivation, perceived control, and coping capacity.

Given this gap, the current study aims to analyze how different forms of bullying—verbal, social, psychological, physical, and cyber—affect the multidimensional structure of students' self-efficacy (Garfias Royo et al., 2024). By identifying which aspects are most vulnerable, the study seeks to inform preventive strategies and support mechanisms in higher education settings. In doing so, it offers a nuanced understanding of how academic environments can be restructured to protect and foster psychological resilience among students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bullying in Higher Education Contexts

Bullying in tertiary education is a growing yet underrecognized issue (Praptiningsih et al., 2024). Unlike bullying in primary and secondary schools, bullying among university students is often subtle, normalized, or embedded within hierarchical and social structures (Hidayah et al., 2022). It can manifest through verbal abuse, social exclusion, psychological manipulation, physical aggression, or digital harassment (cyberbullying), and may be perpetrated by peers, seniors, academic staff, or administrators (Utomo et al., 2020). The persistence of such behaviors within academic spaces challenges the assumption that university students possess higher emotional maturity and self-regulation capabilities.

Empirical studies in both national and international contexts reveal alarming trends. For instance, research at Universitas Negeri Surabaya found that over 60% of language faculty students experienced bullying, mostly in verbal and physical forms (Amaruddin et al., 2025). Similarly, at Gadjah Mada University, nearly 79% of nursing students reported exposure to various forms of bullying, including social and psychological abuse (Ghafara et al., 2021). Comparable findings were echoed in studies conducted in Saudi Arabia, where 85% of medical students acknowledged having experienced bullying during their academic tenure.

These findings highlight the systemic nature of bullying in academic environments and its global pervasiveness (Borualogo & Casas, 2021; Rahmawati, 2020). Moreover, bullying is not confined to classrooms; it extends into dormitories and online spaces, exacerbating psychological distress among students and eroding the safety of educational environments.

Theoretical Framework of Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific outcomes (Herlambang, 2022). According to Hajdú & Rahman, (2021), self-efficacy is rooted in self-assessment regarding one's ability to perform tasks, solve problems, and manage challenges. High self-efficacy contributes to persistence, motivation, academic achievement, and effective coping strategies. Conversely, low self-efficacy correlates with avoidance behavior, reduced resilience, and impaired performance under stress.

In the academic domain, self-efficacy is a crucial determinant of student success (Muhopilah & Tentama, 2021). It influences how learners approach goals, engage with difficult subjects, and recover from setbacks (Yusuf & Farradina, 2021). Key dimensions of self-efficacy include:

1. Confidence in personal capability to influence outcomes,
2. Adaptability to context and environment, and
3. Belief in the value and effectiveness of one's actions.

When students perceive themselves as capable and competent, they are more likely to persist through academic and social challenges (Nurhalimah et al., 2025). This perception, however, is vulnerable to external threats such as bullying, which may disrupt internal motivation and degrade personal agency.

The Relationship between Bullying and Self-Efficacy

The interplay between bullying and self-efficacy has drawn increasing scholarly attention. Ardi et al. (2024) found that students with higher self-efficacy exhibited greater emotional resilience and were less susceptible to the negative consequences of bullying. Conversely, sustained exposure to bullying significantly diminishes self-efficacy by instilling feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, and self-doubt.

Mukminatien et al. (2019) further established a correlation between bullying and a decline in self-belief among school-age children, although the causal mechanisms were not fully explored. Scholars such as Hidajat et al. (2020) and Menggo et al. (2023) emphasized that verbal and psychological abuse, in particular, have profound effects on students' confidence and emotional well-being. Victims often internalize negative labels and self-perceptions, leading to lower academic engagement, reduced participation in social activities, and chronic mental health issues.

Despite growing research in this area, few studies have dissected the specific dimensions of self-efficacy most affected by bullying (Mukminin et al., 2019). It remains unclear how verbal abuse differs from social exclusion in its impact on personal control, or how cyberbullying undermines a student's motivation versus their coping capacity. This research seeks to fill that gap by offering a more granular analysis of how bullying behavior disrupts the psychological architecture of student self-efficacy.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a causal-explanatory approach, aimed at exploring the cause-and-effect relationship between bullying experiences and the degradation of students' self-efficacy (Perry, 2023). Rather than testing statistical associations, the study sought to construct a conceptual understanding of how various forms of bullying influence specific psychological dimensions that compose self-efficacy. The emphasis was placed on exploring patterns, interpreting meaning, and identifying underlying mechanisms that emerge across existing literature.

This research aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, which prioritizes understanding human behavior in its social context (Mueller et al., 2024). The qualitative design was chosen due to its flexibility in capturing complex psychological and social constructs such as confidence, control, motivation, and resilience—components that are difficult to reduce into numerical values.

Data Collection Procedure

The data for this study were collected through a systematic literature review, incorporating both Indonesian and international peer-reviewed sources published between 2010 and 2025. The literature was accessed from databases including Scopus, ScienceDirect, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Indonesian academic repositories (e.g., Garuda and Neliti). Inclusion criteria focused on:

1. Empirical studies discussing bullying in higher education settings;
2. Research articles or reviews analyzing the concept or dimensions of self-efficacy;
3. Publications addressing the psychological impacts of bullying among adolescents or young adults;
4. Studies written in English or Bahasa Indonesia;
5. Published in reputable journals or conferences.

Grey literature, editorials, and non-scholarly sources were excluded unless they contained substantial empirical or policy data (e.g., reports from the Ministry of Education or KPAI). A total of 42 articles were selected and reviewed for this analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following Hammersley, (2003) six-phase model:

1. Familiarization with data,
2. Generating initial codes,
3. Searching for themes,
4. Reviewing themes,
5. Defining and naming themes, and
6. Producing the report.

The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns across studies that describe the psychological consequences of bullying and its impact on self-efficacy components. Themes were organized under four dominant categories: reduction in self-confidence, loss of perceived control, decline in motivation, and disruption in coping strategies. Each theme was mapped against specific types of bullying (e.g., verbal, social, cyber) to determine potential pathways of psychological harm.

To enhance the credibility of findings, triangulation was employed by comparing insights across multiple sources and disciplines (education, psychology, sociology). Expert validation was also conducted by consulting two senior researchers in the field of educational psychology to confirm the relevance and clarity of identified themes.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of selected literature revealed a consistent pattern indicating that bullying in higher education significantly undermines multiple dimensions of students' self-efficacy. Four major thematic

categories emerged as dominant consequences of bullying: diminished self-confidence, loss of perceived control, decline in motivation, and impaired coping capacity. Each theme reflects a specific psychological mechanism through which bullying erodes self-belief and behavioral resilience.

Diminished Self-Confidence

The most frequently cited effect of bullying across studies was a marked decline in students' self-confidence. Victims reported internalizing negative judgments, insults, and social rejection, leading to reduced belief in their academic and personal capabilities (Ahmed et al., 2022; Wahyuningrum et al., 2023). This erosion of confidence was particularly pronounced in cases involving verbal and social bullying, where repeated exposure to derogatory comments or exclusion led students to question their self-worth and competence.

In many cases, victims began to perceive themselves as inherently flawed or incapable, resulting in withdrawal from academic participation, hesitation in group tasks, and reluctance to speak in class (Hapsari & Purwoko, 2016). The self-devaluation effect was also linked to increased anxiety and avoidance behaviors, which further limited their opportunities to rebuild confidence.

Loss of Perceived Control

A recurring theme among victims was the experience of helplessness—a belief that they had little or no control over their academic or social circumstances. This was especially prevalent in instances where bullying occurred in power-imbalanced relationships, such as between senior and junior students, or between faculty and students (Andrews et al., 2023). Victims felt that their ability to change their environment or seek protection was constrained by institutional indifference or fear of retaliation.

Such loss of control translated into passive coping strategies, including silence, isolation, and disengagement from institutional support systems. Over time, this perceived lack of agency eroded their belief in their ability to effect positive change or protect themselves from harm—key components of self-efficacy.

Decline in Motivation

Several studies noted a strong connection between bullying exposure and a decline in academic and personal motivation. Victims frequently reported feelings of futility, discouragement, and emotional fatigue, leading to reduced interest in learning and diminished effort in academic tasks (Nurdianto et al., 2022). This was particularly common in cases of cyberbullying, where persistent online harassment created a sense of inescapability and chronic stress.

Some students described skipping lectures, avoiding group projects, or delaying assignment submissions as a form of emotional withdrawal. In extreme cases, prolonged demotivation led to academic probation or dropouts. The decline in motivation was not solely cognitive but also affective, driven by emotional exhaustion and a lack of perceived social support.

Impaired Coping Capacity

The final theme identified was the disruption of coping mechanisms in dealing with stress and adversity. Many victims of bullying reported difficulty in regulating their emotions, responding constructively to challenges, or seeking help from peers or counselors (Wasiyem et al., 2025). As the bullying continued, students often became more reactive, pessimistic, and withdrawn—signs of deteriorating psychological resilience.

This impaired coping was particularly evident among students who had previously demonstrated high academic performance or leadership roles. The contrast between their past competence and present vulnerability led to identity confusion and lowered long-term aspirations. Moreover, repeated exposure to bullying reduced their confidence in future success, thereby weakening goal-setting behavior and proactive problem-solving—two critical outcomes of strong self-efficacy.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reinforce the growing concern that bullying within higher education settings poses a significant threat to students' psychological well-being, particularly their self-efficacy (Abadi et al., 2024). While much of the existing literature has addressed the emotional and academic consequences of bullying, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how specific dimensions of self-efficacy are structurally undermined by repeated exposure to bullying.

Interference with Self-Confidence

Bandura's theory of self-efficacy posits that individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to undertake difficult tasks, persevere through challenges, and recover quickly from failure (Putra et al., 2020). The present study confirms that bullying disrupts this internal belief system by degrading self-confidence, which functions as the foundational element of personal agency. Verbal assaults and social rejection—identified as the most common forms of bullying—gradually lead students to internalize negative self-perceptions, thus weakening their academic assertiveness and emotional stability.

This pattern aligns with research by Fitriyana et al. (2021), who found that university students experiencing frequent verbal bullying were significantly more likely to report low self-esteem and reluctance to participate in academic discourse. Self-efficacy, once diminished, reduces not only academic performance but also the willingness to seek out support and assert boundaries.

Loss of Control and Psychological Disempowerment

Another crucial insight from this study is the disruption of perceived control over one's academic and social environment. Victims of bullying often feel trapped, particularly when perpetrators hold greater social or institutional power. According to Mahfud et al., (2022) locus of control theory, individuals with an external locus—believing outcomes are determined by outside forces—are more susceptible to psychological distress. In bullying contexts, victims increasingly develop an external locus, believing they lack the ability to influence or escape their circumstances.

This psychological disempowerment leads to passive behaviors, such as silence, isolation, and resignation—further alienating the student from potential protective networks. Such findings mirror those of Asandimitra & Kautsar, (2019), who emphasized that bullying within hierarchical settings, such as universities, reinforces powerlessness and reduces initiative, both of which are crucial for the development of self-efficacy.

Motivational Decline and Academic Withdrawal

The decline in motivation among bullying victims observed in this study is consistent with self-determination theory (Istikomah, 2020), which emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core psychological needs. Bullying undermines all three: it strips students of autonomy through coercion, reduces feelings of competence via humiliation, and severs relatedness by socially isolating them.

Consequently, victims often experience learned helplessness—a phenomenon wherein individuals stop attempting to improve their condition due to repeated failure or trauma (Desnelita et al., 2023). This condition severely weakens the motivational structures necessary for sustained academic engagement. Similar findings were reported by Hartono et al. (2022), who found that medical students exposed to chronic cyberbullying exhibited avoidance behaviors and a reduction in academic ambition.

Compromised Coping Mechanisms and Long-Term Consequences

Perhaps the most concerning consequence identified in this study is the deterioration of coping capacity, which leaves students vulnerable to more severe psychological outcomes, including depression and suicidal ideation. As described in Wangid et al. (2020) transactional model of stress and coping, individuals require adaptive strategies to process emotional challenges. However, bullying victims often lack the internal stability and external resources to activate such mechanisms.

Repeated trauma not only disrupts immediate emotional regulation but also alters students' long-term beliefs about their own resilience. Victims begin to perceive themselves as perpetually at risk and incapable of overcoming future adversity—ultimately leading to chronic avoidance, impaired decision-making, and negative academic trajectories.

Toward a Framework for Institutional Intervention

These findings point to the urgent need for multi-level interventions in higher education that address bullying as both a psychological and structural issue (Roebianto, 2020). Institutions must move beyond reactive disciplinary models and adopt preventive frameworks that integrate psychological support, peer mentorship, and inclusive communication policies. Moreover, building students' self-efficacy should be a key objective of student affairs programs, especially in transitional phases such as the first year of university or during high-stress academic periods.

Faculty and staff also need to be sensitized to the psychological dimensions of bullying. Intervention strategies should not only target perpetrators but also strengthen the protective factors of potential victims by cultivating resilience, assertiveness, and access to help-seeking channels.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the profound and multidimensional impact of bullying on university students' self-efficacy. The analysis identified four key domains adversely affected by bullying behavior: diminished self-confidence, disrupted sense of control, reduced motivation, and impaired coping capacity. These effects, whether stemming from verbal, social, psychological, or cyber forms of bullying, significantly weaken students' ability to function academically and psychologically. The findings underscore that bullying is not merely a behavioral issue but a critical threat to students' psychological resilience and educational development.

Given the pivotal role of self-efficacy in academic success, emotional well-being, and personal growth, higher education institutions must take a proactive role in preventing bullying and fostering environments that promote self-belief, inclusivity, and psychological safety. Targeted interventions that empower students, strengthen mental health support systems, and build institutional awareness are essential to mitigating the long-term consequences of bullying. Further research is needed to develop culturally sensitive frameworks that address bullying in diverse educational contexts and reinforce the protective dimensions of self-efficacy.

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Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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